

MIGHTY MO.

The Atlanta Fox, and the Next 90 Years

BY KEN DOUBLE



On Christmas Day of 2019, the Atlanta Fox Theatre turned 90 years old. If one looks at the history of the great 4/42 Möller pipe organ, Opus 5566 installed in 1929, there is an important moment in the history of the instrument that helped to cement the love affair this city has with its historic theatre and its iconic pipe organ.



(Photos courtesy of the Atlanta Fox Theatre)



Labor Day 2002: The Fox played host to a concert titled *Fox at the Fox*, a tribute to the legendary Virgil Fox who had performed concerts on the Möller many times, including key performances during those early days of the “Save the Fox” campaign in the 1970s.

The headliners were Lyn Larsen, Tom Hazleton, Jonas Nordwall, and Larry-Douglas Embury.

What those four performers did not know at the time was the Fox Theatre’s Board of Directors was preparing a new direction for the great pipe organ. Understanding that the Fox with Mighty Mo provided Atlanta theatregoers an experience they could get nowhere else, the board was set to create a new-at-that-time expanded official position of “Organist in Residence,” and determined the organ would be played for audiences at every available opportunity. (Note, during the ’60s through the ’90s, the console spent much of the time buried in the pit, heard mainly for the summer movies and some special events, most often played by Bob Van Camp. It’s entirely different today.)

Thus, starting in 2002 with Larry-Douglas Embury hired as organist, Mighty Mo has been heard at the Fox more than 120 times a year. Broadway shows; the *Nutcracker* ballet; the *Coca-Cola Summer Film Series*; special holiday concerts; the “Ghost Tours” leading up to Halloween; and other special events find the massive, gleaming console rising out of the pit to the delight of theatregoers who arrive early to guarantee the opportunity to hear—and feel—the music this singular instrument provides.

Currently, the author along with Atlantan Rick McGee (a former student of Van Camp) share the bench at the Fox. And over the past four years, a growing number of serious problems with the console forced

the duo to continually “play around the issues” to make music.

In late 2016, the author first approached Fox Theatre management with the growing list of these issues which included but were not limited to: combination action failure and pistons not functioning; keyboard contacts on the Great manual and on Accompaniment 2nd Touch growing more difficult to make contact; keying and relay ciphers popping up due to serious wiring issues; stops not functioning, plus other problems with the aging console that upon occasion, forced cancellation of the performance for the audience.

What became a growing frustration was the increasing issues with the relay ciphers as that anaconda-thick cable coming out of the console and folding and unfolding with

the travel of the lift would make ciphers intermittent. Some days they would be apparent. Some days not.

And there was no way to tell in advance what might or might not be available, or what could be the newest problem to pop up that day.

One might ask, “Where was the maintenance?” The answer: ongoing. The long time Möller rep in the southeast, George Miller, worked with the late Joe Patten for years, tuning, maintaining, and repairing Mighty Mo, doing so under contract with the theatre. But most of these newer serious issues demanded a complete dismantling of the console if repairs were to be tackled on site. The theatre’s incredibly busy schedule made that very difficult.

Miller himself was recommending a new console as Mo was clearly showing its age while approaching its 90th year of service.

Working with Adina Erwin, the Fox Theatre’s brilliant then-General Manager, and Leigh Burns, head of the Fox Theatre Institute which oversees preservation efforts, the author began serious discussions on how best to correct the number of major problems with the console.

The first suggestion: the Fox needs a new console. And that was met with a resounding “Whoa!” as the Fox Theatre institute and the Preservation Department stepped in to lead the investigation as to the best approach to take with repairs to the console. One needs only to take a few steps into the magnificent theatre to understand that Preservation (with a capital ‘P’) is taken extremely seriously at the Fox.

After careful consideration, management determined bids would be sought from qualified companies to offer their best options going forward. The criteria was clear: 1.) a company with theatre organ console experience; 2.) a company relatively close to Atlanta that could not only more easily honor warranties, but could get to the theatre on short notice if there were issues; 3.) a bid that would reflect Option A, a full restoration as originally built by Möller, and Option B, a restoration with a more modern approach; 4.) and bidders that would understand the special nature of the instrument, the theatre, and the interaction with the public that loves both the Fox Theatre and its beloved Mighty Mo.

The bids came in from three companies. Management pored over the bids; held meetings or calls with the bidders for

questions and exploration; and when a plan was presented for the board of directors’ consideration in July 2018, the board decided to return the plans back to Ms. Erwin and the Fox Theatre Institute for even further study and evaluation on the best option for moving forward.

It is important to understand this timeline and this course of action for this reason: this was not a knee-jerk reaction to a problem; this was not a decision made without serious consideration of the distinctive nature of the Möller console in its original home; this was not a decision cut and dried from the start. The timeline from initial receipt of the bids to final decision covered more than eight months and dozens of meetings and discussions shedding light on the best options going forward.

It is also important to note the high level of interest and great support demonstrated from management and the Fox Theatre board of directors. Mighty Mo is loved, valued, and supported so it can be presented to the appreciative public attending events.

During this time, a group of serious preservationists weighed in with letters, calls and comments on the subject. And their case was well-stated and seriously considered. Leigh Burns and her Preservation Department is tasked with this effort in the great theatre, and her staff’s work in this area is evident everywhere. There was a serious case made for restoring the console exactly as Möller built it.

The other option considered focused on the new technology available for theatre organ installations today. In the end, it was determined the best approach for the Fox Theatre and its ongoing operation was to create a more modern console to control the near 90-year-old Möller.

For our friends who are serious preservationists, this decision has been met with a degree of alarm, concern and sadness. That is understandable. There is much to be said with regard to the few “original” installations remaining in theatres today.

In terms of the Möller organ, it must be noted that Mighty Mo at the time of this decision, i.e. the Fall of 2018, was NOT the organ delivered in 1929. Consider these major changes made to the organ and directed by the late “Phantom of the Fox,” Joe Patten:

- A new 75-hp motor for the blower (the organ sagged badly on the original blower);
- The Gold Piano (Chicago Piccadilly Theatre Kilgen) which forced changes on the stop rail;
- The addition of a 32' Diaphone, originally from the Philadelphia Mastbaum Wurlitzer;
- A major change in winding in the B chamber by which originally, the Post Horn ranks and the Tibia Clausa were wound on the same reservoir, thus the Post Horns trem’ed like the Tibia, clearly a registration issue for anyone playing the organ. Joe Patten changed that; and
- to accommodate the added piano stops, and to correct the fact the “coupler” stops (grouped together on the lower right of the stop rail) and trem stops (labeled “Vibratos” by Möller) were not included in the original Möller “tripper” combination action. Joe Patten added several electronic stop actions to correct those issues.

These and other significant changes were executed by Joe Patten because these changes, many suggested by concert organists Virgil Fox, Lyn Larsen, Hector Olivera, Jonas Nordwall and others, were musically and tonally the right thing to do to create the best music from whomever was tasked with playing the Möller. Thus, although this flies in the face of the Möller being “original,” the fact is Mighty Mo is NOT the instrument Möller installed in 1929. It was changed because those changes made musical and performance sense, and were clearly improvements to what Möller had initially created.

In making the decision to modernize the Möller, the Fox determined that an option proposed by the A. E. Schlueter Pipe Organ Co. of Lithonia, Georgia, made the most sense. The Schlueter bid involved wiring and preparation; then, putting a temporary console—built new in the Schlueter facility—on the lift so the music would continue uninterrupted; removing the original console; incorporating the upgrades and repairs; and bringing the refurbished Möller console back to the theatre for reinstallation.

The Schlueter Company created a spectacular temporary console. Not an imitation of Mo, but a brilliant console that

fits the Fox Theatre's famous décor and was designed to be different on purpose. We wanted to make sure attendees at the Fox understood this is temporary. Mighty Mo's console would return to the Atlanta Fox.

The installation includes added stops to offer greater unification and flexibility, with Jonas Nordwall providing assistance and guidance on those changes; a Uniflex relay and combination action system; an AGO-standard pedalboard; OSI keyboards; and a new total of 414 stops tabs (including the sound effects tabs above the Bombarde keyboard).

The increase from 376 to 414 stops allows for far greater unification than the original Möller, much to the benefit of the player. There is more color, more flexibility, and greater range of musicality now available. The change is stunning in terms of unleashing the range of color in those 42 brilliant ranks of Möller pipework.

The stops reflect the original Möller design and nomenclature, and they have been placed in the correct order as per the Möller stop layout. When the Möller console returns, the piano stops will be the distinctive green color as are all of the percussion stops on a Möller.

Since there were originally six general pistons, we retained that layout, but now there are 24 general pistons. The decision was made to increase the divisional pistons from the original six-plus-cancel, to 10-plus-cancel, allowing today's organist so much greater access to so much more of the organ's resources.

Distinctive features such as the red expression indicators; the swell pedal coupling device; the lever-styled toe controls, and the natural wood swell shoes shall remain with the refurbished Möller console when it returns.

The great Möller is among the most-played theatre organs in the world today. And Atlanta Fox Theatre management is hopeful that there will be a series of guest artists brought to Atlanta to provide music for audiences, in addition to the two staff players. Also, there is great interest in providing opportunities for young musicians to play Mighty Mo.

The refurbished Möller console will accommodate this with attention to the following details:

- A new Uniflex relay system is the new "brain" of the organ;
- Multiple combination memories accommodate multiple players;
- The number of pistons, both generals and divisionals, have increased;
- The idea is that the theatre-goer walking into the Fox will have to possess an extremely keen eye to think anything has changed.

More important is the fact that nothing is being done to the pipework, percussions, winding or basic component mechanisms in the chambers. No speakers, no digital voices. The chambers and the magnificent sound of the organ is sacrosanct.

There is a statement often heard when the subject of original pipe organs and restoration/refurbishing comes up for discussion. It is "First do no harm." While "harm" might have a broad definition, I believe a more appropriate statement would be, "First, what does the owner of the organ wish to do?"

The history of ATOS is dotted with instruments which have suffered badly due to poor decisions made by individuals without the background to make those decisions. Those situations are indeed sad.

In this case, while some are understandably distraught over the changes to Mighty Mo, the final decision was made with a tremendous amount of investigation; with great deliberation; with the future and best use of the instrument in mind as the management of the theatre—the owners of Mighty Mo—determined.

I have made two statements that I believe make great sense in terms of this discussion. First, for Rick McGee and me, playing Mighty Mo during these last three years has been comparable to the conductor of an 80-piece orchestra only able to access 50 of those musicians. The limited pistons combined with the ravages of age and growing malfunctions had rendered the organ extremely difficult to play.

Second, would the Fox Theatre management approach its staff with a suggestion that computers will be done away with, and everyone will now work on 1929 Royal typewriters? While Preservation is an incredibly

high priority, so are other 'P' words such as Performance, Presentation, and Practicality.

Today, Rick McGee and I no longer have to fight the console to make music. The keyboards are clean and accurate; the 2nd Touch functions beautifully with a full range of voices now available;

the pistons allow us to reach deeply into those magnificent voices and create combinations either not possible before, or extremely difficult to execute due to the original layout's limitations; the added stops provide the unification not available before.

Equally as important, acting on the Fox management's desire to "open the bench" to others, we have the multiple memories Uniflex allows, so that guest players from around the world and our local area church organists can come to Mighty Mo and get far more comfortable than before. Nathan Avakian was the first such "guest," playing the audience in for a performance of *Hello Dolly* on Friday night, February 14, 2020.

The Atlanta Fox Theatre has begun the second 90 years of its storied existence with a temporary console to continue the tradition of great pipe organ music at the historic theatre. The original console of its beloved Mighty Mo will return refurbished, upgraded, and ready for those next 90 years, for the benefit of not just those of us in the tight-knit world of the pipe organ, but also for the benefit of the hundreds of thousands who attend events at the Fox every year, and the millions we hope will visit in its next 90 years.

MIGHTY MO MOVES OUT







MO GETS AN UNDERSTUDY

